



## From employee representation to problem-solving - Mainstreaming OHS management

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# **FROM EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION TO PROBLEM-SOLVING - MAINSTREAMING OHS MANAGEMENT**

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# A study of the changing role of OHS reps

## Background

Worker representation in occupational health and safety came after a pressure from unions and were often regulated in collective agreements

In Denmark the Work Environment Act from 1975 secure the right

EU framework directive from 1989: OHS reps in all countries

A change in the Danish OHS legislation 2010

- More flexible ways to organise the OHS work and reps
- However still OHS reps and a basic organisation (less rather flexible)

# Research design

The study included 60 Danish case companies

- On-site visits and interviews with key personnel related to the organisation's OHS management (2-6 persons/firm)
- Representative sample of the 60 companies
- The cases were stratified on five main labour market sectors – construction, manufacturing, private service, knowledge and healthcare

The Danish context

- Strong encompassing unions, legitimized, institutionalized
- Consensual and productivity enhancing approach

# Empirical findings

Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

- Five idealtypes

Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

Professionalization

- But also some ad hoc OHS work/organisation and “side-car” OHS

# Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

Greater emphasis on problem solving in the daily work

Less emphasis on voice and interest of the co-workers  
(the more traditional role)

We identified five ideal types of OHS reps (there are also mixed cases)

# Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

## Five ideal types of OHS reps

- **Professional OHS reps**
  - More resources, fewer reps (two are full-time OHS-reps) and more responsibility
- **Systems maintenance OHS reps**
  - High levels of systematizing and standardisation
  - Most often full time OHS officers and the OHS reps main function is to support the OHS officer in the form of systems maintenance
- **Integration of OHS activities in core tasks**
  - OHS activities are an integrated part of the core tasks
  - The rationale behind improvements and initiatives are linked to the enterprises' operations and core task.
  - Often OHS reps work closely together with management and shop stewards about solving day-to-day operational problems as well the longer term
  - Often in health care

# Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

- **Political OHS reps**
  - A few cases still have elements of the traditional political OSH rep approach
  - Emphasis both employee representation and OHS improvements
  - However the modern political OHS reps are politicizing actors within the organisation
- **Management driven OHS activities**
  - Management domination
  - Strategic OHS activities are centralised to the enterprise top level
  - Daily operation of the work environment is with professional OHS officers or first line managers
  - The OHS reps are more or less push to the side-line,



# Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

OHS is increasingly integrated in the daily operations of the firms

- As opposed to the traditional organisational “side-car” metaphor (Cutler and James, 1997)

*...from a separate and isolated issue to integration of OHS into the main management decisions...*

Mainly the work organisation and management perspective

- Include OHS in operational management

Better employee-management cooperation

Risk of management domination

Not necessarily improving the outcome!

# Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

Mainstreaming in the studied workplaces can be characterised by four key observations:

- Management does not consider work environment as an issue, which needs to be given priority because of employee demands, but as part of regular operations
- Systems are established which are expected to handle work environment issues on a day to day basis and securing that major problems in terms of accidents, diseases, employee complaints and improvement notices from inspectors are avoided
- The work environment is treated as other specific issues such as quality management, environmental management and HR management.
- Staff and resources are allocated to carry out the tasks in the OHS organisation, and OHS reps are considered part of this staff

# Professionalization

*OHS reps have in general become more professional*

- Often they work as OHS professionals
- However some companies still have an ad hoc or side-car approach

## **The ad hoc approach:**

- characterised by the absence of systematic approach to OHS
- Only acts if accidents occur or the labour inspectorate shows up

## **The side-car approach:**

- Formal status required but without any genuine or efficient integration into the daily operations of the firm
- Typically small and medium sized firms

# Interaction of approach and OHS reps

FIGURE 1 *OHS approaches and OHS reps typologies*

General OHS approach			
OHS rep role	Side-car	Ad hoc	Mainstreaming
Professionalization			++
Systems Maintenance	++	+	
Integration		+	++
Political	+		+
Management driven	+		++

Source: Own compilation

# Conclusions

The role of the OHS reps are changing

- Towards problem solving from representing co-workers

There has been a tendency towards

- Professionalization of OHS work
- Mainstreaming – in many companies OHS regulation have become more integrated in the everyday work of the firms
  - Not conflict issue and OHS work needs to be proactive
  - This does not per se secure a higher level of the work environment